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THE RELIGIOUS AND HOSPITABLE RITE OF FEET WASHING

THE ORIGINAL ORIENTAL CUSTOM

One of the least known religious customs of the present day is that of "feet washing," in commemoration of the washing of the disciples' feet by Christ on the occasion of the Last Supper. It is quite a common custom in the backwoods parts of the South, among the descendants of the early German immigrants in the Middle West, and in the Catholic Church. It was formerly a general practice in the Christian Church; now it is confined to the most primitive of Protestant sects and to ceremonial occasions among the Catholics.

We must go far back of the time of Christ to find the origin of ceremonial feet washing. It was, we find, an old Oriental custom, common among all peoples of the arid countries of Asia and Africa. Numerous references are found in the sacred books, especially in the Bible. Outside of the Orient it was practised by the early Greeks, and Homer described it. In the beginning it was simply an ablution, that is, a sanitary and cleanly practice. But after the manner of the Orient, most health laws became religious laws, and thus the practice of feet washing acquired a religious significance. In the hot climate of the East frequent baths were not only a luxury, but a necessity, especially to a traveller after the dusty journey of the day; hence water, the supply of which was often limited, was of vast importance and the sanitary ablution was exalted into the religious ceremony of purification. Consequently we find that ablution as a symbol of purification is frequently mentioned throughout the Bible.

There were several forms of religious ablution — the complete bath, the washing of head and hands, and feet washing. The high priest of the Jews took the ceremonial bath when he was inaugurated, and also on the Day of Atonement before each act of propitiation. Always the Jewish priests bathed the hands and feet before officiating at the Altar. Like other ceremonial customs, that of ablution gradually became more and more complex, until before the time of Christ, the Pharisees had developed it into a meaningless ritual of washings, so complicated that only a very careful person could go through it properly. Several times, directly and indirectly, Christ rebuked this useless formalism.

The ceremonial practice of feet washing had another meaning — that is, it might also be an act of friendship and hospitality; as such, it is common throughout the East to this day. The Oriental sandals allowed the feet to become soiled and chafed, and a traveller upon entering the house or a tent loosed them, not only for his own comfort, but also as an act of courtesy toward the house. It was then the duty of the host to offer water for the bathing of hands and feet, or if desiring to be very hospitable he would order a servant or a son to loose the sandals and wash the feet of the guest. Such a service was usually assigned to a slave; if performed by the son it was a high compliment to the guest; if by the host it was the highest possible mark of respect.

The Old Testament affords several illustrations of this rite of hospitality and respect. For instance, when Abraham saw the three angels in the garb of travellers, he ran to meet them, bowed down, and invited them within, saying: "Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet and rest under this tree." Similarly Lot invited the wayfaring angels: "Turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry and wash your feet." Even the servant of Abraham, out searching for a wife for Isaac, was invited into the house by Laban, who gave him "water to wash his feet and the men's feet that were with him." And when Abigail received the messengers of David, who sent her a command to come and be his wife, she expressed her appreciation by bowing herself on her face to the earth and

saying: "Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servant of my Lord."

This ceremony of hospitality had several shades of meaning. The voluntary performance of such a duty for another signified great affection, humility and respect. Generally, however, while the custom was one of hospitality, to perform it by order, as a servant would, was considered degrading, and the degradation extended not only to the doer of the service but to the vessel used. This is shown in David's boasting speech, "Moab is my wash pot; over Edom will I cast my shoe."

DURING THE TIME OF CHRIST

Before the Christian Era these ceremonies had lost much of their old significance. On this account Christ and his disciples did not conform to the strict customs of the Pharisees in regard to ablutions, and were criticised for not doing so. Their neglect indicated disapproval of those complicated customs which no longer had any practical or religious significance. However, in the life of Christ the rite of feet washing to teach humility and show affection several times occurs. Once when he was at meat in the house of Simon the Pharisee, a woman "which was a sinner," came and "stood at his feet behind him" as he reclined on the couch in Oriental fashion, bathed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and then anointed them. At the house of Simon the leper, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair. The use of ointment after bathing the chafed feet of a person was especially pleasant, and was a mark of devoted and humble affection.

Christ's disapproval of the minute and lifeless observances of the Pharisees was shown in many ways. Especially was it evident in the scene at the Last Supper on the Fourteenth Nisan, when he washed the feet of his disciples. Already he had been blamed for omitting some of the ceremonial ablutions before meals; now he arises during the meal, and bathes the feet of his followers, thus breaking with the Pharisaic custom in another way.

But the prime significance of the act was in a different direction. It was a lesson in humility to the disciples who did not

even yet fully comprehend the fact that the Kingdom of Christ was not of this world. For after he had predicted the near approach of his own death they had disputed as to who should then have precedence. At other times they had entered into unseemly strife for places of honor at the meals, that is, the places nearest the head of the table. At this Last Supper in celebration of the Passover, Christ reclined at the head of the table, while to the right and left along the sides were ranged the disciples. It was under such circumstances, to rebuke former strife and to give an example of humble service, that Christ performed the act of washing the feet that is still commemorated in the most widely separated branches of the Christian Church. The following, given in the words of John, is the only description of the act that has come down to us:

Before the Passover Festival began, Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave the world and go to the Father. He had loved those who were his own in the world, and he loved them to the last. The Devil had already put the thought of betraying Jesus into the mind of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon; and at supper, Jesus — although knowing that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God, and was to return to God — rose from his place, and, taking off his upper garments, tied a towel round his waist. He then poured some water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel which was tied around him. When he came to Simon Peter, Peter said:

"You, Master! Are you going to wash my feet?"

"You do not understand now what I am doing," replied Jesus, "but you will learn by and by."

"You shall never wash my feet!" exclaimed Peter.

"Unless I wash you," answered Jesus, "you have nothing in common with me."

"Then, Master, not my feet only," exclaimed Simon Peter, "but also my hands and my head."

"He who has bathed," replied Jesus, "has no need to wash, unless it be his feet, but is altogether clean; and you," he said to the disciples, "are clean, yet not all of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said "You are not all clean." When he had washed their feet, and had put on his upper garments and taken his place, he spoke to them again:

“Do you understand what I have been doing to you?” he asked. “You yourselves call me ‘The Teacher’ and ‘The Master,’ and you are right, for I am both. If I, then — ‘The Master’ and ‘The Teacher’ — have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet; for I have given you an example, so that you may do just as I have done to you. In truth I tell you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor yet a messenger than the man who sends him. Now that you know these things, happy are you if you do them.”¹

IN THE EARLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

From this example of humble service came the Christian ceremony. In many of the early Christian Churches the ceremony of feet washing was kept up. As a rule it came before the Lord’s Supper, and during the installation of officers. However, it was not universal, no sacramental value was attached to it, and it was not considered a divinely appointed service. In the private houses of the Christians in Asia, Africa and Europe it was also practised as a simple act of civility or of hospitality. Thus in I Timothy we are told that a widow is to be honored if, among other good works, “she have washed the saints’ feet.” Throughout the early middle ages the custom persisted without any definite official sanction by church authorities, and, though the idea of its importance increased, it was not considered a sacrament. In the East it was more prevalent than in the West, and after the separation of the Greek and Roman Churches, it was in the former Church recognized as a sacrament, though it was never in general use.

The Western Church also gave some sanction to the sacramental idea of the ceremony. This was done by the Twentieth Council of Toledo, held in 694 in Spain, the last General Council of the Western Church for several hundred years. The third canon framed at Toledo ordered that “bishops following the example of our Lord shall observe the ceremony of washing the feet of the poor on Holy Thursday.” Holy Thursday corresponded to the Fourteenth Nisan of the Jews, and was therefore the anniversary of Christ’s washing of the disciples’ feet. This

¹ From The Twentieth Century New Testament.

canon fixed the date for the future so far as the clergy of the Catholic Church were concerned. Before this, the proper date had been the subject of some dispute, as is mentioned by St. Augustine.

But, in spite of the action at Toledo, feet washing in the Western Church was never recognized as a sacrament, though the sacramental idea was sometimes mentioned. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, recommended it as a *sacramentum remissionis peccatorum quotidianorum*. In the Cathedral at Milan, Ambrose practised the ceremony regularly, though not as a sacrament.

The custom was gradually discontinued among the laity of the Church in the West, and was transformed into a splendid ceremony celebrated at the coronations of kings and emperors and at the installation of Popes and other high ecclesiastical officials. The custom now was for the personage crowned or installed to bathe the feet of twelve old men. Thus the practice remained during the unity of the Western Church.

IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AFTER THE REFORMATION

After the Protestant Revolution the observance of the custom was continued, but was not uniform among the several divisions of Christians. The Roman Catholics continued as before. In the Greek Church it was gradually discontinued until it survived only in Greek monasteries, on great occasions in the Church, and at the Russian court, where it is still a splendid ceremony.

The Armenians retained it. Their confession says: *Christus pedes discipulorum suorum lavit, ut lueret peccatum pedum Adami, qui ad scientiæ lignum ambulaverat* — Christ washed the feet of his disciples in order to atone for the wrong of the feet of Adam, who had walked to the tree of knowledge.

In Roman Catholic countries the ceremony is still celebrated on great occasions at the Vatican, at the Courts of Vienna, Madrid, Munich and Lisbon, and in convents and cathedrals. It is always a splendid service. Usually twelve poor old men are chosen, who have their feet washed by King, Emperor or Pope, and then receive gifts. The ceremony at the Austrian

Court is, after that at Rome, the most splendid. It always takes place on Holy Thursday, or Thursday of the week before Easter. The day is sometimes called *Dies Mandati* or *Dies Cænæ*, because of the commandment given by Christ and the Last Supper on that day of the first Christian feet washing. The ceremony itself is called *Pedilavium*, or *Lavatorio*, or *Mandatum*, after the first word of the antiphony chanted during the ceremony. In the cathedrals the participants are arrayed in white vestments, and the principal priest or bishop, assisted by deacon and sub-deacon, goes through the form of washing the feet of twelve, sometimes thirteen, poor men.

THE CEREMONY AT THE VATICAN

The finest ceremony is that at the Vatican. It was most splendid about the middle of the nineteenth century, and there was always a vast crowd to see it. It took place in the Clementine Chapel and was preceded by the "stripping of the altars" of lights, flowers and ornaments, in memory of the stripping of the garments from Christ. Then followed the feet washing — *pedilavium* or *mandatum*. To prepare for it, the throne and other signs of royalty were placed in the chapel. Then came thirteen poor priests in loose white robes and white caps, who took seats on a high bench, and each bared a well scrubbed right foot. The Pope next entered, with attendant priests all dressed in white, carrying the train of his robe and bearing towels. A splendid apron was incensed and placed over the fine robes of the Pontiff, who proceeded to the *pedilavium*. A sub-deacon lifted the bare foot of one of the poor men, the Pope knelt, sprinkled on the foot a few drops of water from a silver basin, and, after rubbing it with a towel, he kissed it and passed on to the next pilgrim, as the poor priest was called. The entire ceremony lasted about two minutes. The object of the ceremony as officially stated was "to give the Pontiff the opportunity of learning and practising a lesson of humility."

The music is always chosen to fit the occasion, and during the washing of the pilgrims' feet the choir sang the antiphon *Mandatum Novum*, so called from its first words; it is the Vulgate Version of John 13:34: *Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligatis*

invicem: sicut dilexi vos, et ut vos diligatis invicem—"I give you a new commandment: Love one another; love one another as I have loved you"—the words of Christ at the Last Supper after he had washed the feet of the disciples.

After the *pedilavium* came the serving of the meal. The Pope, with the assistance of attendant priests, bathed his hands and, in the *Salla della Tavola*, served a meal to the thirteen poor priests whose feet he had just washed. Kneeling priests handed the dishes to the Pope, who passed them to the poor men, blessed them and then went away. After the bountiful meal, the pilgrims were given the clothes they wore, the towels, some money, and the leavings of the dinner.

The *Lavatorio* at the Court of Spain is an interesting survival of the feet washing custom. It has been revived since Alfonso XIII became of age. On Holy Thursday the young monarch washes the feet of twenty-five poor people—thirteen beggar men and twelve old women—chosen from the poor of the city of Madrid. Care is taken that they are in good physical and moral health, and before the ceremony begins the right leg of each is washed, disinfected by the court doctors and then perfumed. At the beginning of the service the household priests, acolytes, nobles and guards march in with music and song and range themselves about the hall in which the beggars are seated. Then an archbishop gives a basin to the King, who washes and kisses the feet of the poor people. A dinner follows, gifts are made, and the beggars are dismissed.

IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES OF EUROPE

In the Protestant Churches of Europe the ceremony has been quite unlike that in the Catholic Church. Though many of the early Protestants practised the rite, it was mainly in its primitive form. Luther strongly condemned and ridiculed "this hypocritical foot washing" as practised by the higher clergy on ceremonial occasions. He declared that the higher officials who performed such acts of false humility later evened up by more arrogant conduct toward inferiors; better a bath all over he said, with no religious element about it; as it was, the ceremony was of no value because the heart was not humble. So the Lutheran

churches did not recognize the custom, though some of their members clung to it. In 1718, for instance, a Lutheran church of Dresden formally disciplined twelve members who had allowed the humble-spirited Duke Maurice William of Saxony to prove his humility by washing their feet.

In the Anglican Church the more elaborate Catholic form was at first celebrated. On Holy Thursday, or Maundy Thursday (so called, it is said, from *Mandatum Novum*) the ceremony was observed in great style at Whitehall, where the Bishop of London washed the feet of a number of poor people equal to the number of years of the sovereign's reign. Later this was discontinued, and with it disappeared from the Protestant churches the elaborate celebration of feet washing as a religious custom.

On the other hand, the primitive form of the act survives to the present day, mainly among churches composed of plain people. After the Protestant Revolution, though the Lutherans and Calvinists repudiated the ceremony, the radical sects of Protestants retained or revived it. The most notable of these were the Anabaptists, the Moravians and the Mennonites. The Anabaptists of Germany of the sixteenth century considered it a sacrament instituted and commended by Christ, and the scattered remnants of these people clung to it wherever they went.

The Moravians, of whom Count Zinzendorf was the best known, long considered feet washing as a sacrament and practised it from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, but have now discontinued it. By them it was called the "lesser baptism," and was performed not only by the officials for the members but by the latter for one another. During the ceremony they sang a hymn relating to the circumstances of the Last Supper.

The Mennonites, or followers of Simon Menno, another German sect dating from the sixteenth century, have kept up the custom. The Flemish branch of this sect, stricter than the others, has more regularly practised it. In Germany the Mennonites held it as not only a religious rite but also an act of hospitality — the Oriental idea. To wash the feet of strangers who came within their doors was considered a duty divinely commanded.

AMONG AMERICAN PROTESTANTS

I. *The "Hardshells."*—In America the ceremonial feet washing is found among several organizations of primitive Protestants. Of these there are two distinct divisions, those composed mainly of members of foreign descent, and those whose membership is of English-American origin. The feet washing organizations of the latter are found mainly in the backwoods and mountain districts of the South and Southwest. They include such sects as the "Original Free Will Baptists," the "Baptist Church of Christ," the "United Baptists," the "Primitive Baptists" or "Hardshells," the "Old School Baptists," the "Anti-Mission Baptists," the "Old Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists," and the "Seventh Day Adventists." The last named body is in other respects unlike the Baptist organizations; it is found in the Middle States and West; in this church the Adventists wash one another's feet at the time of the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The closely related bodies of Baptists known as "Old School," "United Baptists," "Anti-Mission," "Primitive," or "Hardshell," and "Baptist Church of Christ"—all found in the remote South, and by outsiders called "Hardshell," believe that "feet washing should be practised by all believers," and they consider it a gospel ordinance that must be continued until the second coming of Christ. At a conference held at Wilton, Maine, in 1831, the "Free Will Baptists," in order to end a controversy in the church, decided that "washing the saints' feet" should be no longer official, but voluntary with each congregation. Some congregations in the Carolinas then drew apart and called themselves the "Original Free Will Baptists." At their quarterly meetings they "wash the saints' feet." From West Virginia to Texas are spread the hill and mountain churches of the "Old Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists," a distinctly Manichean sect, who have feet washing along with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. These bodies of Christians are growing smaller each year. As the backwoods disappears in the South the small primitive denominations gradually give way to or are absorbed into the Regular Baptists and other churches,

and the custom of feet washing then lapses. At the present time, feet washing Baptists frequently have to go ten to twenty-five miles to church. They build few new church buildings and the old ones are usually in districts from which the "Hardshells," as they are called, have disappeared.

To the reverent mind there is nothing absurd about the Southern "piney woods" feet washing. On communion days the brothers and sisters scrub their feet until they shine and put on their best home knit white stockings; at church they take seats on the front benches and bare the feet. Two dignified old brothers, each with a towel over his shoulder and a "noggin" or "foot tub" of water, proceed to wash the feet of the men. Women do the same for one another, and the negro members, if there are any, do likewise for themselves.

The ceremony means much to these people; it is performed in a reverent and dignified manner, and is an impressive sight to some strangers, but to the ungodly small boy, say of a Methodist or Presbyterian family, there is something inexpressibly ludicrous about it. Sometimes the good old "Hardshell" preacher directs a scorching rebuke at these young "limbs of Satan" who show signs of irreverence. The "Hardshell" sects are greatly annoyed by the visitors who out of curiosity crowd to the church on feet washing days and gaze in at the doors or stand up on the back seats to see the ceremony. Under such circumstances it is not strange that the young "Hardshells" sometimes refuse to take part, and are often lost to the church of their fathers through fear of ridicule. The Southern "Hardshells" are fine, plain people, but soon there will be no more of them, for their number is rapidly decreasing.

In the central parishes of Louisiana are found negro churches that preserve the custom of feet washing. The members are descendants of French negro slaves, and speak an Acadian dialect. They call themselves Baptists, but celebrate the Feast Days and Saints' Days, and retain other Catholic customs. With them the ceremony of feet washing comes once a year, at the Watch Night services.

II. *The German Sectarians.*—The principal religious sects in America of foreign origin that practice ceremonial feet washing are the “Church of God,” the Mennonites, the “River Brethren,” the “Amish Brethren” and the Dunkards, or German Baptists. With them the act is classed as one of three perpetual ordinances of divine institution — baptism, feet washing and the Lord’s Supper. All of these sects are of German origin. They are the spiritual — often lineal — descendants of those radical non-Catholics who refused to follow Martin Luther on account of his conservatism and because of his hostility to the lower classes during the Peasants’ War in 1525. These sects are found in Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and the Middle West.

The Mennonites in the United States “wash the saints’ feet” twice a year after the Lord’s Supper; the men and women wait on each other separately; after the feet washing, the right hand of Christian fellowship is given and with it the “kiss of peace” from brother to brother, and from sister to sister. The Mennonites and other Germans wash one foot only; the Southern “Hardshells” often wash both feet.

Of the “River Brethren,” there are three branches: The “Yorker Brethren” or “Old Order;” the “Brethren in Christ;” and “United Zion’s Children.” In the last named branch one person performs the entire ceremony — washing and drying; in the others one washes the feet and another dries them.

The “Dunkards” and “Amish” celebrate the feet washing at the time of the Lord’s Supper. The “Dunkards” begin the service at “early candle lighting.” The men are seated on one side of the meeting place, the women on the other. Large tubs of slightly warmed water are brought in; the men and women on the front seats bare the right foot; then on the men’s side a brother washes the feet of those on the front row. The washer, after he washes a man’s foot, offers him his right hand and gives him the “kiss of peace.” After the washer follows a second brother with a towel to dry the feet. By him also is given the hand of fellowship and the “kiss of peace.” On the women’s side the same procedure takes place. Then those on the first row retire to the back seats and others come forward. During

the ceremony the minister or reader makes an appropriate talk on the lesson to be taught, or reads selections from the Bible on humility, charity, service, etc. After the *pedilavium*, as they call it, comes a supper (not communion) of soup served on long tables; all partake in commemoration of "the Lord's real supper." After this supper the right hand and kiss of peace are again given and then follows the communion.

The "Amish" ceremony is slightly different. It comes sometimes before and sometimes after the Lord's Supper. A sermon is first preached on the thirteenth chapter of John. Then the brothers and sisters seated with their backs to the communion table remove shoes and stockings. On the men's side two preachers put on aprons and each washes and dries the feet of the man nearest. Then, after the right hand of fellowship and the kiss of charity have been exchanged, the washers give aprons and water to those whose feet have been washed, and thus the ceremony proceeds. Likewise two women at a time wash the feet of the women. During the ceremony there is appropriate singing. After the *pedilavium*, they kneel in prayer, then stand, and beginning with the chief preacher, every other man, first, third, fifth, etc., turns to his neighbor on the left and gives him the hand of fellowship and kisses him. The women among themselves do likewise, and then each married man kisses his wife.

The *pedilavium* in the North and West is more elaborate than the feet washing of the South. In the North also sightseers annoy the congregations and the young people, sensitive to ridicule, avoid the ceremonies, which are dying out, though more slowly than in the South.

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